

VZCZCXRO7251

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RUEHLN RUEHLZ RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG  
DE RUEHIT #0051/01 0241610  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 241610Z JAN 07  
FM AMCONSUL ISTANBUL  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6535  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHDA/AMCONSUL ADANA PRIORITY 2287

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000051

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ELTN](#) [EINV](#) [ENRG](#) [IT](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: PM LAUNCHES TUNNEL, LAUDS ITALIAN SUPPORT

REF: ANKARA 123

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¶1. SUMMARY: On January 23, Prime Minister Erdogan used the official opening ceremony of a tunnel on the primary Ankara - Istanbul highway to highlight the strong commercial ties between Turkey and Italy. Erdogan argued that the commercial and business links forged by his government with Italy have helped the two countries grow closer together and have encouraged Italian support for Turkey's EU candidacy. End Summary.

¶2. Prime Minister Erdogan and Italian Prime Minister Prodi headlined the January 23 ceremony opening a tunnel through the Bolu mountain on the main Istanbul - Ankara highway. The tunnel, which began as part of a highway modernization project in 1993, was built by the Italian engineering firm Astaldi. According to Astaldi Chairman Paolo Astaldi, the 3 km-long twin three-lane tunnel with over 5 kilometers of associated viaducts and bridges is one of the largest in Europe. The tunnel links the Trans European Motorway on either side of the Bolu pass, a dangerous stretch of road used intensively by domestic and international truck traffic and the site of frequent road closures and accidents due to dangerous weather conditions. The tunnel is situated in a technically challenging area in a seismically active region - the North Anatolian Fault Line crosses under the highway - and suffered major earthquake damage in 1999. The tunnel cost over USD 300 million to construct, accounting for close to one third of the total cost of the Turkish government-funded Bolu Mountain Pass Project.

¶3. Turkish Public Works Minister Faruk Ozak described the opening of the tunnel as the "realization of a dream." He noted that five or six years ago -- in the aftermath of a major financial crisis as well as the 1999 earthquakes - the completion of the project seemed an almost unattainable goal. However, project insurance paid for all earthquake-related damage and after 5030 days of work one side of the tunnel was finally complete. The Ankara-Istanbul portion of the project should be finished in May after weather conditions permit asphalt work to recommence. Project coordinators estimate that the tunnel opening will cut the Istanbul to Ankara drive time to 3.5 hours from 5 hours as well as increase road safety by diverting traffic from the overtaxed highway through the Bolu pass and into a tunnel fully equipped with modern technical safeguards. Ozak stressed the important role the tunnel would play in his department's efforts to reduce the number and frequency of fatal road accidents.

¶4. Prime Minister Erdogan used his speech, which was televised live by most major Turkish media outlets, to highlight his government's successful cooperation with Italy. Erdogan noted that the ceremony was "both an ending and a beginning" and argued that Turkish cooperation with Italy

would build upon this success. He highlighted the joint Italian - Russian - Turkish Blue Stream natural gas project as well as the East West Energy Corridor and the Turkey - Greece - Italy natural gas interconnector to highlight Turkey's emerging role as an energy corridor. He called for increased efforts, with European/Italian support, to make the Samsun - Ceyhan oil pipeline a reality.

¶5. Erdogan urged his audience to look at the tunnel project not just as a road that cuts the distance between Ankara and Istanbul but as a symbol of friendship and cooperation linking Ankara and Rome. Erdogan explained that historically Turkey and Italy have had close relations built upon their shared Mediterranean and Southern European identity. Successes such as the tunnel project would cause the two countries to grow closer together and strengthen Italy's support for Turkey's EU candidacy, he argued. Erdogan noted that in 1988, there were only 18 Italian firms doing business in Turkey. Now Italy is Turkey's third largest trade partner and there are over 450 Italian firms invested in Turkey -- with 250 of those entering the market since AKP took power in ¶2003. He thanked PM Prodi personally and on behalf of the Turkish nation for Italy's on-going support.

¶6. Italian PM Prodi's remarks were brief and offered in Italian without interpretation. He echoed Erdogan's calls for cooperation between the two countries, noting that the governments had a responsibility to foster peace, friendship and cooperation. Echoing AKP slogans Erdogan declared "our road is open and our future is bright" as the two Prime Ministers cut the ribbon and declared the tunnel open.

¶7. COMMENT: Erdogan's efforts to link cooperation with European companies on major construction projects and Turkey's EU candidacy underscores the difficulties described reftel by U. S. companies currently working in Turkey to find a space to do business with a Turkey increasingly focused upon its European neighbors. Erdogan and Ozak also played to

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an election year audience by highlighting the AKP's ability to deliver the goods to constituents - in this case a billion dollar highway project and major engineering feat - that six previous governments had failed to realize.

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